

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR SELECT COMMITTEE
September 22, 2005

Mr. Chairman:

I want to thank you for allowing me to sit with the Select Committee this morning. As you know, the Science Committee has jurisdiction over the National Weather Service – indeed we had initially planned to have our own hearing with the Weather Service this week – so I thought it was important that I be able to participate.

I will keep my remarks brief. I really want to make just one essential point, and that is that the National Weather Service performed magnificently in tracking Katrina, and in providing information before, during and after the hurricane made landfall. Max Mayfield was the indispensable man in the lead-up to the storm, and we owe the entire staff of the National Weather Service a debt of gratitude.

The men and women of the Weather Service and the men and women of the armed forces who fly into the hurricanes to get data on storms get no special perks if they've had a rough couple of days or a bad season. They have to be ready for the next storm.

I was talking the other day to Deputy Secretary Sampson of the Commerce Department, and he had just been down to visit the National Hurricane Center. He said that morale at the Center was suffering because the staff felt so saddened that Katrina had produced such suffering. That speaks volumes about the kind of people we have working for us down there.

(over)

For in reality, all the Weather Service can do is provide the best information they can – which in the case of Katrina happened to be especially accurate because conditions were ideal for monitoring the storm. In short, the Weather Service can lead officials to information, but they can't make them think. Or act, I might add.

It's your Committee's job to see why better use wasn't made of the information. Today, we'll all be asking an updated version of Howard Baker's famous Watergate question: "What did federal, state and local officials know, and when did they know it." That's the right first step in the important inquiry your Committee is undertaking. And we all anxiously await your findings so that we can avoid mistakes in the future.

In the meantime, the Science Committee will hold our own postponed hearing on Hurricane Katrina – and presumably now on Hurricane Rita – with an emphasis appropriate to our ongoing oversight responsibilities. We will be looking for information about the rest of the hurricane season, about what is behind the increased frequency and intensity of hurricanes, and most important, about what tools the National Weather Service needs to continue to improve its ability to forecast and track storms.

If nothing else, the horrifying events of recent weeks have underscored the value of the National Weather Service. We need to work together to make sure that the Weather Service can provide the best information possible – and that that information is put to better use by those who receive it.

Thank you.